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Baucus wants promises on Libby from new EPA chief

Senator asks would-be EPA administrator to visit Libby, make cleanup a priority

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) said April 7 that before he commits to supporting president Bush's nominee to head the EPA he is asking the would-be administrator to promise to visit Libby personally and make the town's asbestos cleanup a top priority for the agency.

Stephen Johnson, a long-time EPA official, has been nominated to replace as administrator Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, who Bush recently tapped to head Health and Human Services.

Baucus told Johnson April 6 during a hearing of the Environment and Public Works Committee that he would support advancing his confirmation in the Senate only if Johnson agrees to visit Libby as soon as he is confirmed so he can "see what has happened to this community first-hand" and keep cleanup as a top priority at the agency.

Baucus extracted the same promise from the past two EPA chiefs, former Govs. Christie Todd Whitman and Leavitt, but only Whitman made a scheduled visit to Libby as promised. Leavitt made an surprise, two-hour stop in Libby on Aug. 13, 2004, during a flight from Seattle to Denver. He met with only a handful of people who had learned about it just hours before.

Libby is recovering from decades of asbestos exposure from the W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mining that operated in and near the town until 1990.

"We have to see this past the goal line and we cannot let the clean-up drag on into the indefinite future," Baucus said before the EPW Committee, which will likely vote on Johnson's nomination this week. "The people of Libby deserve better. I cannot

vote to confirm you unless I receive this commitment, and a commitment to visit Libby as soon as possible."

Baucus said the EPA spent \$17 million on cleanup activities in fiscal year 2004, and the agency is expected to spend about the same in fiscal year 2005. However, more than 1,000 homes and other properties still need cleanup in the Libby area. At a rate of about 200 properties per year, Baucus said it will likely take five more years and an infusion of \$85 million to finish the job.

"I know that both Governor Leavitt and Governor Whitman were genuinely moved by what they saw there, and I think they better understood why I am so adamant that Libby remain a top funding priority at the EPA," Baucus said. "Libby was devastated by years of exposure to deadly tremolite asbestos, caused by W.R. Grace's vermiculite mining operations. The EPA has



Johnson



Baucus

done good work to date on cleaning up Grace's mess, but a great deal remains to be done and momentum must be maintained."

Baucus also submitted several questions in writing to Johnson which he is waiting for responses to. In addition to visiting Libby and making cleanup a priority, his list of questions to Johnson included:

- The status of the EPA's commitment to help redevelop the Stimson Lumber Mill site so it can be used as an industrial

park for economic development in Lincoln County. "The community is concerned that the EPA is dragging its feet here," Baucus said.

- The status of the EPA's commitment to detail a half-time employee in Libby to work on economic development and marketing.

- The status of Lincoln County's request to develop a proactive plan to address what to do with buildings and homes that cost more to clean than to tear down and replace with new structures. Baucus said the EPA will often spend \$80,000 to \$100,000 to clean a home worth only \$30,000.
- If the would-be administrator supports the idea of expanding the Brownfields program to help clean up toxic methamphetamine sites.